

Comparison of mesopotamia and the indus civilization essay sample



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Mesopotamia and Harappan societies have long been compared throughout the history of archaeology. Mesopotamia, also known as, 'the land between the rivers,' was named for the triangular area between the Tigris and the Euphrates river, (Nov. 7 lecture). In recent use, it covers a broader area referring to most of what is now Iraq. This adds ancient Assyria and Babylonia to the scope of Mesopotamia (Schultz and Lavenda 1995: 310). Parts of Mesopotamia were not inhabited at all until approximately 8000 BC when plants and animals were domesticated, bringing about an agricultural revolution. This allowed nomads and cave dwellers to become farmers and herders.(Whitehouse 1977: 129.)

The Indus civilization is often referred to as Harappan civilization from one of the major sights called Harappa. The Indus civilization existed in South Asia from about 2700 BC to 1750 BC.(Hawkes 1973: 49). Smaller groups lived in the area before this time, but it is around 2700 BC when the typical Indus cities took place.(Hawkes 1973: 53).

These two territories had many things in common, but also differed in some fundamental ways. The economies of both will be analyzed from information available to date, as well as the forms of government and rule that each employed. Next, the social structure of Mesopotamia and the Indus civilization will be compared, focussing on social stratification and employment. Finally, I will discuss the architecture of these two ancient sights and the innovations created or similar materials used.

ECONOMY

The economy of Mesopotamia was mainly agricultural, but also included wool, hair, and leather. (Oppenheim 1977: 83). The domestication of animals, painting of pottery, and most importantly agriculture spread to Greece from Mesopotamia, showing the great influence it had on surrounding areas. (Caldwell 1987: 18). This agriculture was being jeopardized from the progressive salinization of the soil, and the weakening of the dikes. This necessitated constant surveillance employed by the temple and the palace. (Oppenheim 1977: 84). Silver was used in the Babylonian period, and it was being accumulated as treasure by the palace and the temple. (Oppenheim 1977: 89). We know that there were three kinds of trade going on in Mesopotamia, one being inner city trade. The second kind was a carrying trade between foreign cities and trading outposts. The last was the export of industrial goods to sights such as Al Mina at the mouth of the Orontes River in Syria. (Balme and Lawall 1990: 143). Items that were exported include textiles made by serfs, a term I will explain later, and the import of metal, stone, lumber, spices and perfumes. (Oppenheim 1977: 90).

Real estate was also being bought and sold, and tax collectors gathered taxes for the temple offices. This proved to be a problem at one point when it was said that many people were in jail for debt. Artisans were out of work, and apprentices were left with ' food leavings at the gate.' (Hawkes 1973: 158). By the old Babylonian period, however, there was a large population of well-off free citizens who were buying and selling private land, and had slaves to work it. (Hawkes 1973: 159). By this time, the temples had lost their power, while the royal palaces gained it. (Hawkes 1973: 159).

The economy of the Indus civilization was similar to Mesopotamia in that both had an agriculture based on irrigation and fertility by silt bearing floods. Their cereal crops were also similar, the two main ones being wheat and barley. (Hawkes 1973: 267). Trade was a large part of this civilization, but they were not as dependent on trade as Mesopotamia was. (Whitehouse 1977: 136). They traded with their neighbours to the West, (Hawkes 1973: 267) such items as metal ores for crafts, (Hawkes 1973: 270). Trade may have been in the hands of private merchants, for there is evidence for caravan routes. Some routes linked North-West India with Mesopotamia, while others lined the sea route along the Persian Gulf. (Hawkes 1973: 270). Part of every farmers crop was paid into the granary. These granaries were massive for the time, and are said to be the equivalent of a state bank or treasury. (Hawkes 1973: 275). The level of grain present would have represented the level of public credit. (Hawkes 1973: 275). In Mesopotamia there were state and temple grain stores, but because of the size and architectural importance of those at the Indus sights, they are believed to have a greater importance. (Hawkes 1973: 275).

GOVERNMENT

The state in Indus civilization was governed by a centralized government. (Hawkes 1973: 263). The regular planning of Indus towns and cities could only mean that each was built as a whole by an authority with absolute control (Hawkes 1973: 273). Because of the uniformity over such a large area, it is almost guaranteed that the entire Indus area was a unified state. (Hawkes 1973: 273). The two main sights were Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, and they were the commercial and administrative centers. It is unlikely that <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-mesopotamia-and-the-indus-civilization-essay-sample/>

there were two equal rulers, however. (Hawkes 1973: 2730). The citadels suggest a combination of a combined military and religious power. There weren't temples that dominated the area like at Mesopotamia, only a few shrines have been found in the Indus territory. (Hawkes 1973: 276). We don't know the nature of the authority there, whether it was ruling priests or kings, (Whitehouse 1977: 122) but we know the ruling elite had religious practices of ritual cleaning through bathing. (Whitehouse 1977: 278).

In Mesopotamia we have a clearer picture of the ruling powers which were both divine and royal. The Sumerians had a belief that men were created by gods to labour for them. (Hawkes 1973: 148). The temple and its land belonged to the god Ningirsu and his wife Baba, and their family. The land owning nobility included ruling princes and their families, leading priests, and palace officials. (Hawkes 1973: 150). They had a system of payment which was similar to that of the Indus area, which was payment by rations. (Hawkes 1973: 149). They had a predominantly free economy, which included land ownership by farmers and merchants. The political function was not separated from the religious function for much of Mesopotamia's history. (Hawkes 1973: 151). In old Babylonian times a group or council of elders were led by a town or a precinct mayor. (Hawkes 1973: 151). Nobility formed the upper house of elders, and also land-owning commoners met in a popular assembly to make important decisions. Together they managed affairs such as appointing governors, and choosing kings to be temporary military commanders in times of crisis. (Hawkes 1973: 154). Eventually there was a separation of the kings from the temple, and the soldiers were kept in the king's palace. (Hawkes 1973: 156). The king with his increasing power,

acted not only in the name of his city god, but also in that of justice, the sun god Utu. (Hawkes 1973: 170). Because of the divine and the royal interest in justice, the people felt safe and secure that injustices would be punished.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Perhaps this is not exactly tied in with the social structure, but the dress of the Indus people was similar to that of the Sumerians. The men both wore light robes which left the right shoulder bare, wore beards with the upper lip shaved, and kept their long hair worn in a bun. The women wore many necklaces and huge headdresses, and mini-skirts with ornamental belts. (Hawkes 1973: 264). Indus society was divided into basically two areas: The Northern Punjab group with Harappa as its main city, and the Southern (Sind) group with Mohenjo-Daro as its main center. (Whitehouse 1977: 116). The social structure of Indus society included craftsmen such as bead workers, potters, weavers. (Hawkes 1973: 269). Animals like camels and horses were used in society for transportation, and cats and dogs were kept as pets. (Hawkes 1973: 267). The massive walls were guarded by soldiers, and there must have been a military force of some size. (Hawkes 1973: 273). The greatest prosperity in Indus society concerning foreign trade was from 2340 BC through the third dynasty of Ur, a Mesopotamian city. (Hawkes 1973: 279). This civilization is thought to have had a small slave or near-slave population working on lines in the granary. Slaves were not thought to have been as prevalent here as in Mesopotamian societies.

Much more is known about the social structure of Mesopotamia, including the fact that they had medicine and physicians. Documents from old

Babylonian periods say that they used herbs and animal parts. (Oppenheim 1977: 290). As was mentioned above, Mesopotamia had a much greater slave population, including different kinds of slaves. There were slaves which private persons kept, and those belonging to the palace and the temple, called serfs. (Oppenheim 1977: 75). City people did not usually own slaves though. (Oppenheim 1977: 76). The family units here were small, with one wife, except in old Babylonia sometimes a man could take a second wife. (Oppenheim 1977: 77). There were other associations shown in society such as religious care for the souls of the dead, and professional groups of highly trained people in exorcism and divination techniques. (Oppenheim 1977: 79). There were brewers and craftsmen whose success depended on the internal political equilibrium of the palace and the temple. (Oppenheim 1977: 80).

Often in Mesopotamia there existed a tension between it and surrounding country which caused a lack of political stability (Oppenheim 1977: 82). The temple and palace made income from taxes or rent or income from agricultural holdings. They also collected the offerings from worshipers of god. (Oppenheim 1977: 95). In Mesopotamia there was a special relationship between the king and his god, and there was said to be a 'god ownership' or theocratic socialism meaning that the city was not only ruled but owned by a god. (Whitehouse 1977: 54). The relationship between the king and his subjects was complete obedience on the same level as worshipping gods. (Oppenheim 1977: 103). The upkeep of roads was the royal responsibility, and certain privileges were also ensured by the city, which all took place inside the city walls, much like the city walls of Indus areas.

ARCHITECTURE

There has been far less digging done on Indus sights, and a lack of contact with the people there through their script since it hasn't been deciphered yet. (Hawkes 1973: 264). The ruins of Harappa were dug away for railroad ballast, so getting further information is almost impossible. (Hawkes 1973: 271). The two main cities were built with an amazing regularity. They were built on a regular grid plan of straight streets, the first known planning of this kind in the history of civilization. The streets were unpaved and dusty, and the cities had a number of public wells and a complete drainage system. (Hawkes 1973: 271). On the street corners were single room dwellings which housed watchmen who patrolled the streets at night. On the Western central block was the citadel, which was the same in relation to the lower town as Assyrian citadels. (Hawkes 1977: 272). They were raised to a height of forty feet on a mound of mud brick with fired brick revetments. The foot was protected against floods by massive embankments.

The citadel was strongly fortified with towers and walls, and was built in a rhomboidal plan. (Hawkes 1973: 273). At the Sind capital there is a large pool or bath of forty feet wide with a broad flight of stairs which leads into it. This was believed to be used for ritual cleansing, and religious purification. The long house next to the great bath could have held priests, but it was not royal for there were no signs of royal belongings or thrones. (Hawkes 1973: 273). The city blocks had brick houses in various sizes, but private homes had at least two storeys. They turned blank walls to the outside world, and opened up to an internal courtyard. (Hawkes 1973: 276). They were made of baked brick and had brick staircases leading to upper floors and the roof. <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-mesopotamia-and-the-indus-civilization-essay-sample/>

(Whitehouse1977: 125). They had a drainage system which was 'unparalleled in pre-classical times, and unapproached in the non-westernized orient of today.' (Hawkes 1973: 276). Each house had a bathroom and earthenware pipes which carried out waste. (Hawkes 1973: 276).

In Mesopotamia kiln-fired bricks were being used commonly in the Early Dynastic period. They were used for pavement and architectural facing where buildings were most exposed to rain. (Hawkes 1973: 118). In the Early Dynastic period they invented the true arch, one of the tombs in the royal cemetery at UR has an arch of burnt-brick. (Hawkes 1973: 119). They also invented the barrel vault, leaning each arch of bricks at an angle against the next, finding the final support from an end wall. This made it unnecessary to use expensive wooden centering to support the vault while it was being built. (Hawkes 1973: 119). By the third dynasty of UR the chambers in the royal mausoleum had corbelled vaults of burnt brick. (Hawkes 1973: 120). The Sumerians and later people still preferred long, narrow rooms. When the towns grew there was an increase in the size and monumentality of temples and palaces, and also an introduction of huge walls and gates, like those in the Indus area. (Hawkes 1973: 120). Private homes became more elaborate as did temples.

There was the evolution of the platform into the ziggurat, which is a huge multi-staged, pyramidal temple mound. These ziggurats dominated almost all of the Mesopotamian cities, but were never found in the Indus territory. The ziggurat was built solely to raise the temple and shrine of the presiding deity. (Hawkes 1973: 121). Houses had domed bread ovens and some had large grain bins. (Lloyd 1978: 73). A temple at Al-Ubaid is ornamented with <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-mesopotamia-and-the-indus-civilization-essay-sample/>

copper figures and mother of pearl is also used. (Hawkes 1973: 123). Before the middle of the early dynastic period the king had his quarters in the temple area. (Hawkes 1973: 124). After this time, however, the king had a different place to live. The layout of Mesopotamian cities is very different from those of the Indus area, as the houses were arranged in a maze. This is thought to be a strategic defense against intruders, which would confuse them in the maze of buildings. (Larson 1979: 73). It contrasts greatly with the organized grid-like layout of the Indus sights.

CONCLUSION

These two early civilizations shared many similar traits in their societies. Economically, both areas relied on trade, but Mesopotamia was much more reliant than Indus civilization. Both had agriculture which relied on silt for fertility. They both had similar cereal crops which included wheat and barley. Indus Civilization had a large granary which dominated their architectural monuments, whereas Mesopotamia had no major granaries in their society.

The government of Mesopotamia was mostly tied in with their religion, as their king was very much associated with a particular god. During the process of this society, focus was shifted from religious rule to a king's rule. Much less is known of Indus government including details such as whether the structure in their government was led by priests or kings. We do know that they had a heirarchical social and political system, and had two main centers called Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

Concerning the social structure of the Harappan civilization their territories were guarded by a massive wall, and it is known that they had a military
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force of some size. Mesopotamia had similar large walls meant for defence, but the organization of the buildings at Mesopotamia helped in defence as they were built in a confused maze. The upkeep of roads was a royal responsibility, and the relationship between kings and subjects was obedience on the same level as worshipping gods.

The architecture was similar in both areas as they both used burnt brick. The Mesopotamian area had many temples, which is a complete contrast to the Indus area which had none. The Mesopotamians also had Ziggurats which were huge, multi-staged pyramidal temple mounds. One way that the Indus Civilization stood out is in their urban drainage systems. It is said that they were 'unparalleled in pre-classical times, and unapproached in the non-westernized orient of today.'

So it is obvious that these two areas had similarities as they grew and expanded in the early civilizations, but they had more pronounced differences in vital areas. Perhaps someday, more will be found out about Harappan civilization and a more thorough inquiry can be carried out. But until then, we will slowly piece together information as it becomes available, building a history of these great pre-classical civilizations.